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ABSTRACT

To determine why some persons leave the university while others remain in the student role, a study compared a group of 44 university students aged 60 and over with a group of 50 ex-students of the same age. The two groups were comparable in age, education, sex, and income. The ex-students stayed at the university a significantly shorter time (2.5 years) than the students (4 years). Both groups felt accepted at the university and felt supported in the student role by faculty, students, and relatives and friends. The ex-students left primarily after reaching their objectives; a large proportion became employed. The continuing students planned on remaining at university indefinitely, even after obtaining their degrees. Findings indicated that the groups of older students and ex-students appeared to differ only in the length of time spent at the university and in their employment status. However, for one group the student role acted as a means to meeting other objectives, while for the other it was an end in itself. Moreover, leaving the student role was not difficult for the one group while it appeared inconceivable for the other. (Four tables are attached.) (Author/YLB)

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WHEN OLDER PERSONS LEAVE THE STUDENT ROLE

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Abstract

This study compares a group of 44 university students, aged 60 and over with a similar group of 50 ex-students of the same age in an attempt to determine why some persons come to university and leave while others remain in the student role. The 2 groups were comparable in age, education, sex and income, however, the ex-students stayed at the university a significantly shorter time, 2.5 years, than the students, 4 years. Both groups felt accepted at the university and felt supported in the student role by faculty, students, and relatives and friends. However, the ex-students left primarily after reaching their objectives with a large proportion becoming employed. The continuing students plan on remaining at university indefinitely, even after obtaining their degrees. The results indicate that the university and the student role can meet a variety of needs, both instrumental and expressive, for older persons and that it is essential not to stereotype or segregate them on the basis of age.

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When Older Persons Leave the Student Role

For several years, the idea of lifetime learning, learning which is not confined to particular ages, has been permeating the ways in which educators think. This concept has become more widely accepted as the population has begun to age and the potential youthful, traditional college student population subsequently decline. With this decline expected to continue until the 1990's and with the educational background of cohorts of older people increasing, it may be anticipated that more and more older persons will enter the student role.

Several authors have discussed the contributions that the educational system can make to the lives of older adults. It can play an important part in the development of new skills and new means of stimulation as well as assisting the individual in adjusting to social and personal life changes (Stanford, 1972; Birren and Woodruff, 1973; Havighurst, 1976). For persons 50 to 60 education can assist in helping to develop new careers and interests while for those 60 and over it can provide intellectual challenges and satisfactions as well as new meaningful social roles (Parelius, 1975).

Aging and Role Transitions

Aging has been described as a period of role transitions and role losses (Riley, 1968; Rosow,1975). Social roles related to the family and employment, the major roles of individuals, begin to contract and are lost as children leave home retirement and retirement and widowhood become common. Roles of equal value and status to replace those that are lost are not always available. The role of student is an attractive one to many older persons in that it involves particular status as well as prescribed rights and duties. The role can serve as a vehicle for social interaction and the role participant can feel a special measure of self-worth and esteem associated with its status. These aspects of the student role, the transition into it and the value it can provide, make it applicable to the testing of social theory describing the aging process. In this present paper two specific theories, continuity theory and social breakdown theory, are applied to the older students.

Studies indicate that those most likely to take on the role of student are those persons who have had experience with the role either through their own education or through that of family members (Hooper and March,1978; Graney and Hayes, 1976; Covey, 1980.) This familiarity with a role and with its involved behaviors and structure can ease the process of role transition (Brim, 1968).

By understanding the role, the individual is also better able to anticipate it, further increasing chances of successful transitions (Merton, 1951; Atchley, 1977). This previous

experience is also essential for role continuity described by Bultena (1969 Covey (1981).This theory states that older persons will seek to continue in roles which provide status and personal satisfaction and which they find meaningful; the student role may meet these needs for many persons. Moreover, success in the role can lead to increased feelings of competency and self-esteem assisting the older person to maintain a positive identity (Kuypers and Bengston, 1973).

Objectives of Study

This present study compares a sample of older persons who attended university for at least one semester and then left with a group of older students who have remained in the student role. Most of the literature on older adults in education has been descriptive of the types of persons likely to enter education and of their specific needs and interests on the campus. Research has not looked at what happens to persons who decide to leave the student role or their reasons for doing so. An understanding of why persons choose to leave can provide more information about adult role transistions and role loss. If persons leave because of an inability to maintain the role of student they may be at risk of role discontinuity and "breakdown "and an increased sense of dependency. On the otherhand, if they leave because they find the role no longer meets their needs, they may be leaving with a new sense of identity and accomplishment.

Study Design

San Jose State has offered a fee waiver program to persons 60 and older since 1975. The students pay $3.00 a semester but must

meet the regular university requirements for either undergraduate or graduate studies. There are no restrictions on the number of units they may take, and, except for having to register on a space-available basis, they are treated academically the same as all other students. There are no classes offered specifically for older students.

The samples used in this research were composed of persons 60 years of age and older who were either presently students of San Jose State University or had been for at least one semester up but had failed to return in either the Spring of Fall semesters of 1983. Questionnaires were mailed to the entire population of 81 non-returning students and to a random sample of 60 presently enrolled students. The response rate to the questionnaire of the non-returning students was 62% (50). If adjustment is made for respondents who had died or moved, the response rate increases to 68%. The response rate for the enrolled students was 73% (44).

Insert Table 1

These characteristics, although not representative of older people in the general population, are similar to those discussed by other researchers as being related to participation in the student role (high level of education and relative affluence.) The high proportion of married persons amongst the groups was also found in the research of Graney and Hayes (1976) who believe that marriage in itself provides persons with a means of support

allowing them to experiment with new roles.

The chi square test for significance was used in to determine whether or not the two groups could be distinguished by any of the descriptive variables. As illustrated in Table 1 the 2 groups did not differ in regards to sex, marital status, college education or income levels. The high level of education of the samples, 70% in each possessing at least a Bachelors degree, makes this population very select. It also supports the idea that these persons are familiar with university and the role of student through their own direct experience. Moreover, those leaving the role are not doing so due to a lack of knowledge of its related expectations.

The majority of each group was seeking a degree, providing a specific objective for their education. The two groups do not differ in age or in income levels indicating that neither of these variables can explain why certain persons leave the university.

The variable in which the two groups do significantly differ ($p < .05$) is the number of years spent at San Jose State. The ex-students spent a median of 2.5 years in comparison to the continuing students who spent a median of 4 or more years. This indicates that the education system may be meeting differnt needs for the 2 groups.

Social Supports

Literature on role transitions and socialization stress the neccessity of social supports for successful socialization. Supports provide positive reinforcement to the individual during role transitions. As previously discussed, marriage in itself appears to be supportive of the college role. To determine the

extent that supports could influence the continuation in the role, the samples were questioned regarding the attitudes of others, both on and off campus towards their being at university.

Insert Table 2

This data in Table 2 show that in regards to the attitudes of social supports, outside of the university, spouse, familiy and friends,the 2 groups do not differ. Both the students and ex-students feel that these persons are positive towards their being at university. Several persons included comments that friends could not always understand why they were there and were somewhat envious of their involvement. Many stated that their children thought it was a "great idea" and were proud of their being students.

The relationship and attitudes of supports within the university also did not distinguish the students from ex-students. There were no differences between the groups in the extent of their socialization with either older or younger students. In fact, the data indicates that socialization is not a primary concern of these groups as the majority of each claimed to socialize only somewhat with either older or younger students.

On the other hand, both the students and ex-students felt accepted by the younger persons and the faculty. Negative feelings or attitudes from the campus community were not related

to persons leaving the university. Many written comments were given regarding how age seemed to disappear as an important characteristic in the college classroom. Several older students felt a nervousness at the beginning of the semester as they wondered how they would be accepted but in all instances this disappeared after a couple of weeks as they began being treated as just part of the group. The importance of this acceptance is illustrated by the statement of a 65 year old ex-student," It is an exciting experience to share a rap-session with a younger group, to compare experiences, to be at least momentarily accepted with the stigma of age forgotten- it makes youth less threatening and age less overwhelming."

Persons felt that faculty appreciated their being in the class as they brought experience and new perspectives. One ex-student was contacted by her art professor and asked to return as her proficiency in water colors and her exhibits were helpful to the younger less experienced students.

Reasons for Leaving

Insert Table 3 and Table 4

The largest proportion, 41%, left university because they had reached their own educational objectives. They had accomplished their tasks and therefore saw no reason to continue in the student role. This role was a means to an end for these persons as it is to most younger students. One woman in this group stated that she was only able to finish her education after her four children were

settled and that she felt an extreme sense of accomplishment in finally having obtained her degree.

The next largest group (22%) left due to employment. In this area the ex- students differed significantly ($p < .01$) from the students. Moreover, amongst the present group of students only 19% planned on using their education to find work. These findings indicate that for many persons education is instrumental to developing new careers. A 68 year old ex-student stated that he came to the university as a place to go when he retired as an engineer. He found learning easy and realized that he still had potential and ability. After one year he left to start his own computer consulting business. The ex-students differed significantly from the students in terms of employment. In fact, only 19% of the present students planned on using their education to help them find work.

Ten per cent of the sample stopped due to family responsibilities. "I had to stop to take care of my 3 month old granddaugter. I found it too difficult to do homework and babysit at the same time. As soon as she starts pre-school I intend to return to university,"(a 69year old male ex-student). Another student stated, "I had to stop to settle my husband's estate but I plan on returning and living long enough to finish my degree,"(74 year old).

These two reasons combined, having reached educational objectives and employment, account for the largest proportion of persons leaving. Furthermore, they are indicative of role transition rather than role loss. These persons have used the

role of student as an instrumental role rather than as an end in itself. Just as these students initiated taking on the role, they also initiated giving it up when it no longer met their needs. Further support of the idea that this may be viewed as a role transition, rather than a loss, is shown by the fact that 39% of those leaving intend to definitely return to the university while another 28% state they may return (Table 4).

Plans to Leave the University

The sample of present students was asked when they thought they would leave the university. Although 52% of this group were working towards a degree, 77% stated they would stop only when they were physically unable to attend. The degree in itself was not the main objective of their education. The primary reasons for going to university were for enrichment, self-satisfaction and "fun." Regarding the importance of the university to their lives, comments ranged from, "It's what holds me together," to "I'll come as long as there are classes that interest me and there is something to learn." One retired animator for the movies said that he had just begun working in bronze, "Where else could I have this opportunity?"

For this group the role of student meets many internal needs. As long as this role remains satisfying and challenging, this group of older people may be expected to continue in it.

Discussion

In summary, the findings of this study indicate that these groups of older students and ex-students appear to differ only in the length of time that they spend at the university and in their

employment status. However, for one group the student role acts as a means to meeting other objectives, while for the other, it is an end in itself, reflecting the instrumental and expressive purposes of education discussed by Havighurst (1975). Further research is needed in order to understand the dynamics determining the meaning of the student role to older people. Moreover, leaving the student role is not difficult for the one group while it appears to be inconveivable for the other. This finding also underscores the variability amongst older students and their educational objectives and the necessity of not stereotyping them on the basis of age. Just as with other groups of students, older people may also be meeting a variety of needs at the university and it may be difficult to distinguish between them.

The findings do support the theory of role continuity. The majority of these persons had had previous college education so that in later life they were stressing an earlier learned role. Their experience and success with the role eased transition in and out of it, minimizing any sense of role loss. The status and sense of satisfaction and enjoyment that persons encountered in the role along with the support they perceived should ,according to "social breakdown theory", assist them in maintaining a sense of identity and well-being minimizing their risk of dependency. It may be hypothesized that this competency is demonstrated by the numbers of persons who leave to take on new careers and new roles.

The findings of this study may not be generalizable to other populations of older students in that this group has begun with a

high level of education. But the findings do reveal that older persons may meet many different needs through the student role. The data also shows that older persons enjoy the stimulation of being with younger persons in regular classrooms and that segregating them could be a disservice to both age groups. The persons in this study are a vibrant and dynamic group whose involvement on the campus can broaden the learning experience.

Universities play major roles in shaping the youth and future of society. They can now begin to play major roles in shaping the later years through including more and more older persons on the campus. Simulateneously, through their interaction with faculty and younger students these older students can meet both their own needs as well as help to restructure some of our sterotypes and myths regarding aging.

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Table 1

Selected Characteristics of Students and Ex-students

	Students (n=44)		Ex-students (n=50)	
	n	%	n	%
Characteristics				
Age				
Years, median	67		67	
Range	60-84		60-82	
Sex				
Females		58		57
Males		42		43
Marital status				
Married	23	52	31	66
Widowed	9	20	5	11
Divorced	10	22	6	13
Never married	2	4	5	11
Education				
Previous college degree		70		70
Seeking college degree		52		58
Income levels				
Under $5000	2	5	2	4
$6000-10,0000	6	15	8	17
$11,000-15,000	6	15	5	10
$16,000-20,000	5	12	8	17
$21,000 or more	22	54	25	52

Table 1 (cont.)

	Students		Ex-students	
	n	%	n	%
Number of years at SJSJ				
1 or less	3	7	11	22
2	9	20	13	26
3	8	18	11	22
4 or more	25	57	15	30
Median for students = 4+ years				
Median for ex-students = 2.5 years				
Chi square= 8.33 ($p < .05$)				
Employment status				
Employed	9	21	22	52
Unemployed	34	79	20	48
Chi square = 10.73 ($p < .01$)				

Table 2

Measures of Social Support

	Students (n=44)		Ex-students (n=50)	
	n	%	n	%
Attitudes of spouse				
Positive	23	91	26	84
Negative	2	9	9	15
Attitudes of family,friends				
Postive	30	94	40	89
Negative	2	6	5	11
Socialized with older students				
Very much	5	12	3	6
Somewhat	18	42	30	67
Not at all	20	15	12	27
Socialized with younger students				
Very much	14	33	9	19
Somewhat	23	55	32	68
Not at all	6	14	6	13
Felt accepted by younger students				
Very much	39	87	36	77
Somewhat	5	13	11	23
Not at all	0		0	

Table 2 (cont.)

Felt accepted by faculty				
Very much	42	98	37	79
Somewhat	1	2	9	19
Not at all	0		1	2

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Table 3

Ex-students Reasons for Leaving University

	n	%
Reached educational objectives	19	41
Employment	10	22
Health	4	9
Family responsibility	4	9
Lost interest	3	6
Moved from area	2	4
Class work too demanding	1	2
Other (parking, transportaion)	4	9

Table 4

Plans to return

	n	%
Yes	18	39
Maybe	13	28
No	15	33